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A CASE STUDY OF ANIMAL WELFARE AND THE UK'S LEADING RESTAURANT COMPANIES

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Abstract

Restaurants are intimately bound up with animal welfare, in that a food offer is their *raison d'être*, but the issue of animal welfare in the restaurant industry has received little attention in the academic literature. This exploratory case study looks to add to this literature by reviewing how the leading UK restaurant companies have publicly addressed animal welfare. The case study identifies, and draws out, five themes, namely strategic corporate commitment, a focus on supply chains, policies on specific categories of animals and food products, auditing, and welfare performance, that illustrate/capture the approach the leading restaurant companies in the UK have taken to animal welfare. The authors also raise a number of wider issues about the restaurant companies approach to animal welfare, including the aspirational nature of their commitments, the emphasis on audits, the role of animal welfare pressure groups and campaigns, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Animal welfare: Animal welfare policies; UK restaurants; Auditing; Welfare performance

Introduction

Animal welfare is a topic of public interest across many societies, and it generates vociferous and passionate debate. Domestic pets aside, most people's closest, if indirect, contact with the welfare of animals is through the food they eat, though in many ways animal welfare is effectively separated from the practice of eating animal products. Buller (2016) argued that *'shopping for welfare-friendly food products becomes an act of care-at-a-distance'*, while Buller and Roe (2018), claimed *'we largely take farm animals' lives (and deaths) for granted when we eat them and their products'* and they suggested *'for most of us, meat, egg and dairy consumption has become so distinct – geographically, morally aesthetically - from livestock, that the animal disappears.'* The restaurant industry is intimately bound up with animal welfare in that a food offer is its *raison d'être*, but rather surprisingly, the issue of animal welfare in restaurants has received little attention in the academic literature. With these comments in mind, this case study looks to extend this literature by providing an exploratory review of how the leading restaurant companies in the UK have publicly addressed animal welfare. The case study includes an outline of the basic characteristics of animal welfare, a cameo literature review, brief details of the frame of reference and method of enquiry, a review of how the selected restaurant companies' approach animal welfare, a reflective discussion on this approach, and a conclusion which suggests a number of future research agendas.

Animal Welfare

Animal welfare revolves around the belief that animals are sentient beings, namely that they feel or perceive things and that consideration should be given to their physical, emotional and behavioural well-being. As such, animal welfare concerns arise over a variety of issues, including care for domestic pets, the exploitation of animals for commercial

entertainment and in the tourist industry, animal experimentation in scientific and medical laboratories, and the treatment of animals in modern agricultural production systems. Essentially, the concept of animal welfare is concerned with how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives, and it is generally seen to include three elements, namely, an animal's normal biological functioning; its emotional state; and its ability to express normal behaviours.

For the American Veterinary Medical Association (2020) an animal is seen to be in '*a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress*', and '*ensuring animal welfare is a human responsibility*.' More popularly, commitments to animal welfare are often characterised by the '*Five Freedoms*' framework, initially drawn up by the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council (2009). These five freedoms, or domains, are freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express normal behaviour; and freedom from fear and distress.

Cameo Literature Review

In looking across the food industry a quarter of a century ago, Hughes (1995) argued that concerns about animal welfare '*presents the UK industry with both threats and opportunities. Livestock products that are animal welfare-friendly, produced with traditional/natural methods and carry "passports" offer important consumer benefits that can provide a competitive edge.*' However, the issue of animal welfare and the restaurant industry has received limited attention in the academic literature. Where such work has been published it has often examined animal welfare as just one of a number of issues, rather than focussing exclusively on animal welfare. That said, a cameo literature review of the work published on animal welfare and the restaurant industry provides an academic context and set of reference points for the case study.

Some work has been published on how restaurant companies have looked to assure the animal welfare of products on their menus, and on their success in getting their animal welfare messages across to customers. Fraser (2006), for example, reported that a number of restaurant and food retail companies had developed programmes to assure their customers that the food products they sold met basic animal welfare standards. Here the author contrasted the standards at Marks and Spencer, the major UK retailer, with those at McDonalds restaurants in the US, where standards were explicitly described as '*fairly basic*.' Grandin (2010) argued that the use of animal based scoring systems had resulted in great improvements in handling and stunning when it was used by restaurant companies to audit slaughter plants. Kim et al. (2018) suggested that linking animal welfare initiatives to marketing programmes had not proved effective. Further, the work by Kim et al. (2018) suggested that while consumers increasingly demand that food companies demonstrate greater social responsibility, they are increasingly sceptical of companies' engagement with social causes, and they were particularly sceptical of marketing messages about animal welfare.

Research has also been undertaken to examine if animal welfare concerns influenced customers' restaurant patronage and menu choices. In looking to investigate the factors that influence the effectiveness of customer relationship management advertising, Kim et al. (2016), for example, examined the effect of message type and social cause category,

including animal welfare, on attitudes and behavioral intentions in the customers of US restaurants. Here, Kim et al.'s (2016) work suggested that consumers' attitudes towards restaurant companies' advertisements were not affected by the category of social cause. Schjoll and Alfnes (2017) suggested that few researchers had studied the effect of how credence attributes such as origin, organic, animal welfare, sustainability and free trade, affected customers' menu choices. In a study of menu labelling in an experiment in '*a fine dining restaurant*' in Norway, Schjoll and Alfnes (2017) found that adding words to the menu description, such as organic, or describing animal welfare, had a very limited effect on customers' choices in the restaurant. Filimonau and Krivcova (2017) argued that animal welfare can be a crucial factor driving food choice but concluded their work with a general recommendation that restaurants should play a more active pro-active role in encouraging customers make more environmentally friendly purchasing decisions.

On the conceptual side, Buller and Morris (2003) argued that that science has largely failed to provide a socially acceptable conceptualisation of animal welfare, and most of the more recent work on the concept of animal welfare seems to have been concerned with definition rather than theorising. However, as this case study is focused on how restaurant companies have addressed animal welfare, legitimisation theory and stakeholder theory are arguably of greater relevance. Legitimation theory is essentially concerned with how organisations obtains its legitimacy, and licence to operate, by its attachment to certain values within society (e.g., Burlea and Popa 2013). There are a large number of definitions of stakeholder theory (Miles 2017), but essentially it holds that a company should create value for all its stakeholders, including shareholders, suppliers, employees, society at large, animals, and the environment.

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

In looking to undertake an exploratory review of how the UK's leading restaurant companies publicly addressed animal welfare, the authors chose the top ten restaurant operators, by revenue, as listed by Food Service (2018), namely McDonalds, Starbucks, Costa Coffee, Domino's Pizza Group, Pret A Manger, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Nando's, Subway, Burger King, and Pizza Hut, to provide the framework for the case study. The authors employed a simple method of enquiry, which they believed to be fit for purpose to discover if, and how, the selected companies addressed animal welfare. More specifically, Internet searches were conducted using the name of each of the selected restaurant companies and animal welfare as the key phrases. These searches, undertaken in March 2021, provided the empirical material for the case study. As this material is in the public domain on the selected restaurant companies' corporate websites, the authors took the considered view that they did not need to seek permission to use it.

Some authors (e.g., de Grosbois 2016) have used forms of content analysis to systematically identify themes and issues on corporate websites. However, given the exploratory nature of this case study and that the material on animal welfare on the selected restaurant companies' websites was clearly signposted, the authors were minded that a sophisticated quantitative content analysis was not appropriate. Rather, the authors undertook an informed reading of the relevant document to draw out the important issues and themes. The paper draws extensively on selected quotations drawn from the selected restaurant companies' corporate websites. The aim here, is to explore how the companies publicly expressed, and evidenced, their approaches to animal welfare, and the authors

took the view that this was perhaps best captured in the retailers' own words, not least in that quotations could convey corporate authenticity, and offer greater depth of understanding (Corden and Sainsbury 2006). When outlining issues of the reliability and the validity of information drawn from Internet sources, Saunders et al. (2009), emphasised the importance of the authority and reputation of the source, and the citation of a specific contact who could be approached for additional information. In collecting the restaurant companies' material on animal welfare, the authors felt that these two conditions were met.

Approaches to Animal Welfare

The Internet searches revealed that all the selected restaurant companies posted animal welfare statements or policies or reports. However, the depth and detail of this material on animal welfare varied considerably, and while some of the companies did little more than signal their commitment to animal welfare, others looked to evidence that commitment in a number of ways. However, rather than describing each of the company's specific approaches to animal welfare, the aim here is to identify, and draw out, a number of general themes that illustrate the approach the UK's leading restaurant companies have taken to animal welfare. More specifically, the authors' reading of the restaurant companies' animal welfare statement and policies enabled them to identify five general, but interlinked, themes namely, strategic corporate commitment, a focus on supply chains, policies on specific categories of animals and food products, auditing, and welfare performance.

Firstly, strategic commitment was expressed in a variety of ways and for some of the selected companies such commitments included a forward looking dimension. Nando's (2020), for example, reported signing *'the Better Chicken Agreement, which means that we pledge to fully implement higher standards of chicken welfare for chickens in our supply chain by 2026.'* In asserting its belief that *'good animal welfare is a high priority for our business and our guests'*, Burger King (2019) emphasised the company's commitment *'to working with our protein suppliers to ensure that the health and welfare of animals reared to produce products for our business are protected at all times'* and its requirement that *'our animal welfare policy standards be well embedded across our supply chain for all species.'*

Costa Coffee (2021) claimed *'we understand our customers expect us to ensure responsible animal welfare standards in our supply chain'* and *'over and above this however, we believe that having good animal welfare management is the right thing to do.'* Kentucky Fried Chicken (2020), suggested *'we know that incredible taste is so closely linked to quality — and because we believe that great quality starts with higher animal welfare standards on farms, we took a big step last year and became the first in our sector to sign up to the Better Chicken Commitment.'* Starbucks (2020), emphasised *'our goal is for all our products to meet high quality and ethical standards'* and *for the food and dairy we serve this means a commitment to social responsibility standards with animal welfare as a primary focus.'*

A number of the selected companies looked to enshrine their approach to animal welfare, within the Five Freedoms framework. Pizza Hut (2019), for example, emphasised that the *company supports the commonly accepted Five Freedoms of animal welfare.'* Here, in addressing freedom from hunger and thirst, for example, the focus was seen to be on animals having *'ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour',*

while the provision of *'sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind'* is seen to address freedom to express normal behaviour. While Domino's Pizza Group stressed its commitment to the Five Freedoms, the company signalled that it also had animal welfare policies covering its corporate commitment to adherence to current legislation, the transport of live animals, the use of antibiotics and growth promoters, and genetic engineering.

Secondly, the selected restaurant companies explicitly recognised that their supply chains played the crucial role in addressing animal welfare. Pizza Hut (2019), for example, claimed *'the single greatest product responsibility for Pizza Hut is to ensure that the highest standards of food quality and safety are always maintained in our supply chain. It is also an important ethical concern and we work closely with our suppliers to ensure that the animals reared for Pizza Hut are well cared for and are reared in the right way. Pizza Hut will only work with suppliers committed to recognised humane practices, good animal husbandry and welfare standards.'* McDonald's (2020) acknowledged *'while McDonald's doesn't raise any livestock or operate any slaughter facilities, we understand our responsibility to improve the health and welfare of those animals in our supply chain throughout their lives.'*

Subway suggested that its guests and stakeholders expected the company's sourcing policies to reflect the highest quality and safety standards and claimed that strong animal welfare standards served not only to ensure the health and welfare of farm animals, but also to contribute to the health and well-being of the company's guests, as well as society and the environment. Further, the *'Vision'* underpinning Subway's (2019) *'Animal Welfare Policy'*, for example, was focused on the belief that *'safe and quality food comes from healthy farm animals that are bred, raised, transported and slaughtered with high standards of animal welfare'*, and that *'together with our suppliers, we aim to provide our customers with safe and quality food without compromising animal welfare practices recommended by the best available science.'* Domino's Pizza Group (2019) stressed its commitment *'to ensuring high standards of animal welfare throughout its supply chain'* and that *'all suppliers to Domino's Pizza UK and Ireland Limited must adhere to our policy and work towards achieving our long-term commitments.'*

Thirdly, some of the selected restaurant companies provided details on specific animals and animal products. Pizza Hut, for example, outlined its policies on pork and beef; poultry; eggs; dairy; and fish and seafood. In addressing eggs, for example, Pizza Hut (2019) stipulated that *'all whole/shell and product/ingredient eggs sold within Pizza Hut must originate from free range farms'*, and that no eggs or egg products are *'to be sourced from hens in caged systems.'* At the same time, *'all pork and beef sold within Pizza Hut must be sourced from farms that are certified by a relevant national farm assurance scheme that is annually independently audited by a recognised certification body and uphold animal welfare certification'* (Pizza Hut 2019). Pizza Hut (2019) also stipulated that *'all milk used in our mozzarella within Pizza Hut must be sourced from farms that are certified by a relevant national farm assurance scheme that is annually independently audited.'*

In addressing the sourcing of beef, McDonalds set out its long term commitments to animal welfare, including ensuring that all cattle have access to loose housing (when housed) by 2030, that all animals are given analgesics for all surgical procedures and for all

forms of castration, dehorning and disbudding, and reducing mortality rates below 1.5%. In focusing on pigs, Domino's Pizza Group (2019) emphasised that *'all pigs should be reared in compliance with source country legislation'*, that the company is *'committed to eliminating the use of close confinement production systems such as sow stalls from our supply chain'*, and to working with *'suppliers to ensure environmental enrichment is provided to all pigs in the supply chain by 2025.'*

Fourthly, there were commitments to auditing designed to help to ensure animal welfare at various stages within the supply chain. Kentucky Fried Chicken (2020), for example, reported *'in order to ensure that the welfare of chicken is continuously improving, all suppliers are independently audited to formally assess compliance, share best practice and identify opportunities for improvement.'* More specifically, KFC reported that suppliers are visited every fifteen months and that all aspects of supply are audited. Subway (2019) reported giving preference to suppliers that *'already utilize credible third-party audit programs to ensure animal welfare standards are maintained as part of their own sustainability mission'* and, *'when necessary'*, Subway implements third party audit programmes at its suppliers.

Pizza Hut reported that the company required all its suppliers to permit independent auditors access to supplier documentation, management, and workers to determine compliance and progress against its sourcing code of practice. More specifically, Pizza Hut reported that all its pork, beef, poultry, and dairy suppliers are independently audited annually. For poultry, for example, Pizza Hut's requirement for suppliers include stocking densities, environmental standards covering lighting and air quality, perch space and the availability of pecking substrates. In a similar vein Burger King reported that many of its beef suppliers *'source from farms which adhere to national farm assurance schemes'* and that *'these schemes are independently audited and verified by recognised certification bodies.'* Here, Burger King's requirement is *'beef cattle must have access to pasture both on farm and at fattening, at least during the growing season'*, that when the cattle are outdoors, *'there is constant access to shade and shelter'*, and that *'stocking densities must be carefully controlled to ensure that good cattle welfare is maintained at all times.'*

Domino's Pizza Group's (2019) animal welfare policy includes a number of references to the company's audit requirements. Under this policy, the use of antibiotics, hormones or growth promoting antibiotics is strictly prohibited and such usage is strictly monitored and subject to ad-hoc audit by Domino's Pizza Group. The policy also specified that all suppliers are subject to a compliance audit, and that all new suppliers must complete an animal welfare questionnaire. More generally, in reviewing suppliers' compliance with its animal welfare, policy, *'higher risk companies'* are audited *'at least every two years'*, while all other suppliers *'receive an audit at least every four years'* (Domino's Pizza Group 2019). McDonalds emphasised its stringent requirements on the humane slaughter of animals within its suppliers' slaughterhouses and reported that its expectations are verified by independent audits of such operations. Further, McDonalds(2019) reported *'where suppliers are identified through independent audits as not complying, we work with them to develop their practices and, where necessary, robust and sustainable corrective action plans.'*

Fifthly, some of the selected restaurant companies suggested that they were moving towards reporting on their performance in looking to meet animal welfare targets, though here again some of their goals were aspirational. McDonalds (2019) reported briefly on its

goals on animal housing, cage free and free range eggs, and chicken welfare, and while the company reported that all the eggs used in its menu, and as ingredients, within the UK were cage free, its commitment to sourcing chickens with improved welfare outcomes was to be fully implemented by 2024. Kentucky Fried Chicken (2020) reported on its *'animal welfare outcomes'*, which the company described as *'key performance indicators'*, that were seen to *'cover critical areas of health & production that are important indicators of good Husbandry and the welfare of chickens.'* Here the aim was to *'identify, report and drive meaningful improvement on the most pressing challenges across the industry'* (Kentucky Fried Chicken 2020). More specifically, Kentucky Fried Chicken (2020) reported on a number of *'flock outcomes measures'*, including environmental enrichment, stocking densities, transition to higher welfare breeds, the responsible use of antibiotics, and mortality rates.

Discussion

All the selected restaurant companies publicly addressed animal welfare, albeit in different measures, but some wider issues merit reflection and discussion. Companies were often at their most emphatic in emphasising their strategic commitment to animal welfare, but some of these claimed commitments are explicitly aspirational and expectational. Such corporate aspirations and expectations can be seen to reflect public concerns about animal welfare but as some of the selected companies source animal products across extensive geographical areas, fulfilling such aspirations presents complex challenges. Not least in that there are different cultural attitudes to animal welfare in different communities and different parts of the world.

At the same time, the restaurant companies' commitments to animal welfare are at least one step removed from their own operations, and this massively reduces their control of animal welfare measures. Here an important element in some of the restaurant companies' approaches to animal welfare is the regular independent audits of their animal and animal products' suppliers. However, in examining consumer concerns about food safety, the environment and animal welfare, Haggarty (2009) argued that audit-based governance is effectively shaped by the food industry's major players, who have effectively converted perceived *'consumer preferences into checklists of acceptable farming practices.'* More specifically, in reviewing the role of *'audit in animal welfare'*, Escobar and Demeritt (2016) highlighted the general *'tendency for audit processes to become decoupled from the qualities they are meant to assure.'* As such, there is the danger that the audit exercises become a routine reporting end in themselves, rather than a means, to an end.

More generally, some of the selected restaurant companies are facing increasingly strident criticisms of their approach to animal welfare. World Animal Protection (2018), for example, launched its *'Change for Chickens Campaign'* in 2016, which looked to draw attention to what it saw as some restaurant companies' failures to address the welfare of chickens within their supply chains. Two years later (World Animal Protection 2018), published a damning report *'The Pecking Order'*, which argued that the major fast food companies were *'failing the chickens their businesses depend on.'* Further, the report claimed that the majority of the *'600 billion chickens farmed annually worldwide endure acute and severe suffering'*, and that they are subjected to *'cruel confinement in crowded, featureless and unnaturally lit sheds'* (World Animal Protection 2018). SubwayEatCruelty (2020), an alliance of animal protection groups, claimed that while Subway promises its customers that its food is of a high quality and that it is produced sustainably and to high

ethical standards, *'the exact opposite is the case'* and *'the chickens that end up in Subway's sandwiches and salads have lived, and died, under excruciating conditions...'* At a time when social media is becoming an increasingly important force in energising public opinion, it remains to be seen how well the leading restaurant companies in the UK will be able to assuage animal welfare concerns.

At the time of writing, it is impossible to consider animal welfare issues and restaurant companies without some reference to COVID-19, not least because *'the virus affected virtually all parts of the hospitality value chain'* (Gossling et al. 2020). On the one hand, media reports that many abattoirs and meat packing and processing plants were COVID-19 hotspots and had been closed, albeit temporarily, and restrictions on international trade in meat and poultry products, have disrupted many traditional supply chains. On the other hand, public concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, and about reported incidences of high levels of the virus amongst people working in food processing and packing plants, and fears about the future transfer of viruses from animals to humans, have heightened consumer awareness about the safety of animal products within food supply chains. It remains to be seen if, the leading restaurant companies in the UK will continue to commit the financial resources required to address animal welfare concerns, or if they will concentrate their resources on looking to rebuild their businesses. That said, restaurant companies will surely ignore the potential long term implications of COVID-19 at its peril.

The COVID-19 pandemic may provide important opportunities for leading restaurant companies to review, and to revise their approaches to animal welfare and food safety. Looking to alternative futures, Plant Based News (2020), a media outlet producing content about veganism and plant based living, suggested that *'with growing concerns about food safety in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and estimates that three out of every four new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals, it's about time that food companies ramped up their efforts to prevent the spread of such diseases.'* Further Plant Based News (2020) claimed that *'the immune systems of animals raised on lower welfare factory farms are far weaker than any other; couple this with the immense overcrowding seen on these intensive farms - where some 90 percent of farmed animals are raised - and the risk of contracting and spreading dangerous diseases is worryingly high.'*

At the same time, the review of the selected restaurants' approaches to animal welfare has also highlighted some links to legitimisation theory and stakeholder theory. In publicly addressing animal welfare, and in the wake of strident criticism of their approach to animal welfare, the selected restaurant companies might be seen to be pursuing legitimisation strategies, and, as such, their approach might be seen to be consistent with legitimisation theory. The selected restaurant companies approach to animal welfare might be seen to illustrate the importance of the companies' relationships with their stakeholders, particularly with suppliers and with the general public. On the one hand growing public concerns about the welfare of animals might be seen to be reflected in the selected restaurant companies' increasing public commitments to animal welfare. However, the restaurant companies do not report on if, and how, if they elicited customer's opinions on animal welfare, or on if, and how, such opinions were incorporated into their animal welfare policies. On the other hand, the locus of power between the selected restaurant companies and their suppliers lies very much with the restaurant companies, in that they look to control their suppliers business operations.

Conclusion

This case study has provided an exploratory review of how the ten leading restaurant companies in the UK have publicly addressed animal welfare. Five interlinked themes illustrated the selected companies' approach to animal welfare namely, strategic corporate commitment, a focus on supply chains, policies on specific categories of animals and animal foodstuffs, auditing, and welfare performance. At the same time, some of the restaurant companies' commitments to animal welfare are aspirational, and at least one step removed from production, and there are specific concerns about auditing in meeting commitments, and more general public concerns for the welfare of animals in the companies' supply chains.

The case study has its limitations, not least that its empirical material is drawn solely from the selected restaurant companies' corporate websites and does not include any face to face interviews, or focus group sessions, with representatives from those companies. At the same time, the authors did not include the restaurant companies' suppliers in their research enquiries. However, the authors believe that their simple method of enquiry is fit for purpose for an exploratory review paper, that it adds to the currently limited literature on animal welfare in the restaurant industry, and that it offers a useful platform for future research.

Animal welfare in the restaurant industry certainly offers a wide variety of research agendas. At a conceptual level, for example, animal welfare provides opportunities to test, develop, and refine stakeholder theory by exploring how the positions of different groups of stakeholders within the restaurant industry are incorporated into corporate decision making about approaches to animal welfare. At the same time, analysis of both changing perceptions of the importance of animal welfare considerations, as well as how such changes might be balanced against other corporate goals, will also contribute to ongoing work on stakeholder theory. A wide range of empirical research opportunities can also be identified. At the corporate level for example, research may help to increase understanding not only of why, and how, restaurant companies develop their policies on animal welfare and how they look to elicit stakeholders' opinions, but also of how restaurant companies look to take account of wider pressure group campaigns in formulating such policies. Research on how animal welfare concerns inform the relationships between restaurant companies and their suppliers, and on the location of power within these relationships, also merit attention. .

At the operational and consumer level, many research issues arise, but two sets of questions provide an illustration of possible research agendas. Does greater consumer awareness of restaurant companies' approaches to animal welfare influence patronage and menu choices? How do restaurant companies incorporate animal welfare policies into their general marketing messages, into marketing messages at the point of sale, and if, and how, corporate approaches to animal welfare are communicated, and regularly reinforced, to restaurant employees? Finally, although this case study has explored the animal welfare commitments and policies pursued by the leading restaurant companies in the UK, an examination of smaller, and more local, companies' policies on animal welfare, would broaden the scope of this genre of work.

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